

Constructing Religious Discourse in Diaspora: American Hinduism

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This chapter discusses the following topics related to the construction of the identity of the Hindu community in the U.S.: (a) the rationale for choosing religion as the marker of identity, (b) the role and the patterns of language(es) used in the religious discourse, (c) the change in the (Hindu) religious discourse in the U.S., and (c) the issue of 'authority' which licenses the change in the religious practices (including language-use) in the diasporic community. The major thesis of the chapter is that the construction of the diasporic religious identity is primarily a process of contextualization (Pandharipande 1997) of the religious system in the new socio-cultural context. This process involves adaptation/change in Hinduism in order to meet the needs of the new context. Moreover, the paper claims that 'authority' which authenticates the remaking of the discourse is not a frozen concept; it is continuously and contextually constructed.

Introduction

Research in the past two decades (Appadurai 1996, Clifford 1992, 1997, Needham 1975, Safran 1991, and Hall 1996, among others) has described diaspora from various perspectives. As a process, it is characterized as 'globalization', 'traveling', or 'displacement' of cultures. As a resultant state of 'displaced' cultures, it is labeled 'hybrid cultures', 'mixed cultures', or 'dwelling-in-displacement', while as a differentiating marker of a community, diaspora is often described as hyphenated identity: 'U.S.-Indian', 'Canadian-Indian', etc. (for further discussion of various interpretations of diaspora, see Clifford 1997). Although they differ with respect to the details of their displacement from the homeland and their new sociocultural contexts, all diasporas share two features in common, i.e., 'dwelling-in-displacement' (Clifford 1997:288), and construction of a new distinctive identity. Clifford (1997:287) refers to the latter as, 'forms of community consciousness and solidarity that maintain identifications outside the national time and space in order to live inside with a difference'.

Thus, the construction of a diasporic identity displays continuation of roots (or selective features of the native culture) as well as accommodation of selected features of the new sociocultural context. Diaspora is a meeting point of the processes of globalization (exemplified in the travel to and accommodation of the new host culture) and localization (manifested in an identity different from the host culture but similar to the native culture).

It is becoming increasingly evident from the current research (Appadurai 1996, Chow 1993, Rex 1997, and Hall 1996, among others) that diasporas differ from one another in their past histories, present situations, and future aspirations/goals. As a result of these differences, diasporas show significant variations in their motivations for, and the processes of reconstruction of, their identities in new sociocultural contexts. Thus, the medieval Jewish Mediterranean (as well as Greek and Armenian) diaspora, the modern 'black Atlantic diaspora' (Gilroy 1993), and the post-modern diasporas after the decolonization of Asian, African, and South American countries significantly differ from one another. Safran's (1991:83-84) six features of diaspora (history of displacement, memories/vision of homeland, alienation in the host country, aspiration for eventual return to the homeland, continued relationship with the homeland, and a collective identity defined by this relationship) do not adequately characterize every case of diaspora across time and space.

A study of a diasporic identity has a dual significance: theoretical/universal and empirical/culture-specific. As a universal quest, it provides insights into universal issues such as (a) the motivations and processes of the re-making of the identity of a displaced culture in a new context; (b) the determinants of the selection of identity markers; (c) the phenomenon of crossing borders, with regard to whether it is unidirectional, i.e., whether both the guest as well as the host culture cross the borders of nationality, religion, and social structure; (d) whether the reconstruction of the identity is interactional so that both cultures 're-construct' their identities by integrating the 'other'; and, finally, (e) how the discourse is constructed between tradition and transformation on both sides of the borders.

The empirical/culture-specific dimension of the study of diaspora aims at (a) identifying the rationale for selecting certain markers of diasporic identity in a specific sociocultural context, (b) examining the difference between the diasporic identity markers and their respective native counterparts, and (c) evaluating the processes of authenticating the new diasporic identity in the new sociocultural context.

In the context of the above background, this chapter examines the diasporic identity of the Hindu immigrant community in the U.S. In particular, the following questions are addressed: (a) Why does the Hindu community choose religion as the dominant marker of its Indian identity (the question of selection of the identity marker)? (b) Is the pattern of religious discourse homogeneous (the question of variation in discourse patterns)? (c) What is the role of language in the construction of these discourse patterns? (d) How are the patterns authenticated (the

question of authenticity and authority)? (e) How is religious discourse in the U. S. different from its counterpart in India (the question of interpretation, representation, and translation)? (f) Are the patterns of discourse the same across generations (the question of transmission of identity)?

The major thesis presented here is that, in order to understand diasporic discourse, it is necessary to have a thorough knowledge of the 'authority' which authenticates the re-making of the discourse in a new sociocultural context. Moreover, it is pointed out that 'authority' is not a frozen concept; it is continuously and contextually constructed. It will be demonstrated that the devices used to authenticate Hindu religious discourse in the U.S. show the adaptation of the discourse to the new host culture.

A majority of the current studies on the Indian/Hindu diaspora in the U.S. (e.g., Fenton 1988, Rangasamy 1998, Saran & Eames 1988, Williams 1996, among others) primarily describe its historical, social, and religious, and cultural dimensions. However, these studies do not adequately address the questions mentioned above, and the general question of the role of the language has not received much attention from scholars.

It is this motivation to understand the Hindu religious discourse in the U.S. which has driven me to address this topic. I feel privileged because I have had a small part in the process of the construction of religious discourse. Three years ago, a Catholic priest in Champaign and I together constructed a text for a wedding ritual containing a mixture of Sanskrit (the traditional language of Hinduism) and English. The groom was Catholic and the bride was Hindu. Both wanted their respective faiths to be represented in their wedding ritual. The priest and I performed the ritual together. While the couple and the congregation believed in the efficacy of the ritual, it left me with several questions: Was the mixed text authentic? Was it right? Should we not have mixed these two languages and traditions? Why did the couple want to have a mixture of both traditions? These questions need to be answered in order to understand the structure and function of the diasporic discourse. It is in this context that I locate the present discussion.

The following example of a popular devotional song (*bhajan*) at the Venkateshwara Hindu temple in Penn Hills, Pennsylvania, succinctly summarizes the process, form, and function of diasporic Hindu discourse in the U. S. and marks the consecration of diasporic (Hindu-American) identity in the U.S.¹

amerikā-vāsa-jaya-govinda
penhil-nīlaya-rādhe govinda
śrīguru-jayguru-viṭhala-govinda

'Victory to Govinda, who has now made Penn Hills in the U. S. his home. He is (our) Guru, he is Viṭṭhal, he is Govinda'.

This is an example of the discourse of the Hindu diaspora in the U. S., its displacement or travel away from the homeland, its remaking in the U. S., the choice

of religious rituals as its identity marker, and, most importantly, the use of Sanskrit (mixed with English words) as its expression.

In the following discussion, Sections 2 and 3 provide a brief profile of the Hindu community in the U.S. and the rationale for selecting religious discourse (rituals in particular) as an identity marker. Section 4 discusses the role of language in the religious rituals and the patterns of language used in these rituals, and explains the function and the process of authentication of diversity of these patterns. Section 5 focuses on the question of interpretation of the religious language in the new host culture. Section 6 concludes the discussion and raises some questions related to the diaspora in general and the Hindu diaspora in particular.

A profile of the Hindu community in the U.S.

At present, there are about 1.5 million Indian immigrants in the U. S. A majority of them arrived in the U. S. during the late sixties or early seventies. 85 percent of them are Hindus (for further discussion on the history of immigration of Indians, see Saran 1988 and Rangasamy 1998). Although their major concentrations are in and around large cities such as New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles, Hindus live in various parts of the U. S. They belong to various castes and sects of Hinduism and have diverse regional and linguistic backgrounds (for further discussion on the Hindu immigrants, see Fenton 1988, 1996). They have come from different parts of the world (e.g., the U.K., Uganda, Kenya, India, and South Africa). What they commonly share is religion (Hinduism), which they choose as the major marker of their diasporic identity, and Hindu rituals, which have become the expression of that religious identity.

Fenton's 1988 survey shows that 20 percent of his informants said that they became more religious and ritualistic after they came to the U. S. In order to understand the structure of the religious-discourse diaspora, it is important to understand the goal of religious discourse, and the context within which this discourse is constructed. When communities and cultures emigrate, there is physical as well as psychological displacement from the native context.

However, we need to remember that not all traveling communities re-form, re-make, or re-construct their identities in exactly the same way. Their roots and routes of travel differ and so do their goals in retaining or reconstructing their identities in the host, or new cultures. Some strive to reconstruct or maintain their identities, while others choose to negate it. What they share in common is that their inherited identity is always the reference point to which they return or from which they depart. As the author Jamaica Kincaid (cited in Katrak 1997:202) remarks, referring to her Antiguan identity, 'I do not know how to be there, but I don't know how to be here without being there'. In contrast to this, Bharati Mukherjee (cited in Katrak 1997:211), a well-known South Asian immigrant and author, claims that one has to murder one's earlier self or cultural identity for the remaking of the new self. According to her, 'There are no harmless, compassion-

ate ways to remake oneself. We must murder who we were so we can rebirth ourselves in the image of dreams'.

Indian immigrants at large fall between the two extreme positions sketched out above. They choose to retain their identity by adapting it to the new context. It is crucial to understand the goal behind this re-construction or maintenance of their identity in order to understand their choice(s) of identity-markers(s) and the patterns of variation in their diasporic discourse.

The purpose of reconstructing identity in diaspora:: Identity marker

Fenton 1988, Pettys 1994, Rangasamy 1998, and Saran 1988, as well as my own survey of Hindu communities in Illinois and Indiana, have shown that for a majority of first generation Hindus the purpose of reconstructing identity in diaspora is two-fold: (a) to repair their fractured or disturbed grammar of culture or self, and (b) to transfer the grammar of culture to the next generation. Although this disturbance and remaking of the grammar of culture occurs in the native context as well, the causes of the disturbances, the methods to repair it, and the situations to which it must adapt are different in diaspora. The cultural self (or grammar of culture) can be seen as a construct of three interdependent components: (a) Cognition of the world or the worldview (philosophical component), (b) Expression of this world view through social patterns of behavior (e.g., language, art, language etiquette, etc. (social component)); and (c) Goals, aspirations and desires (ideational component). The grammar of culture is disturbed when these three components are not aligned.

In the first-generation diasporic community, the obvious missing component is the native social context (native religious, political, social, linguistic, and educational institutions of India) which generally sustains and propagates the philosophical content and helps build the ideational self. Thus, the diasporic Hindu community chooses the identity marker(s) which (in addition to preserving the authentic philosophical content) provide them the social context (group solidarity) within which they can sustain, reinforce, and perpetuate their world-view; and this must be transferable to the next generation. One of my interviewees said, 'We want our children to inculcate our religious/social values so they can avoid the pitfalls in the American culture such as breakdown of families, drugs, violence, and excessive materialism'. 'After all' she said, 'they [children] have the advantage of the heritage of a religiously-grounded ancient culture which should help them combat the challenges of the new times'. Although a majority of the Hindus want to maintain their religious identity, they do not want it to hinder their progress in their professional and social lives, which they share with the other Americans. Thus, the marker they choose must construct the 'local' distinctive identity with an added important condition: it must not obstruct, but rather perpetuate globalization — or in other words, efficient function — in the new, host culture (American culture in this case).

It is not surprising that religion has been chosen as the marker of cultural identity by the Hindus. Religion provides what Geertz 1973 calls the authentic '*model for*' and '*model of*' the grammar of culture, i.e., the world view, moral/ethical values, patterns of behavior, and, more importantly, the rationale for their existence and interdependence. Culture is 'an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbol, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life' (Geertz 1973:89). Religion provides authenticity and authority to the cultural identity; it gives autonomy to the community, since there is no interference from the host community in this domain. It is perceived as a timeless framework which has been transferred from one generation to the next and it is believed to be universal, and therefore adaptable, to new social and cultural contexts.

Historically, India's cultural identity is shaped by religion. Whenever India's cultural identity has been threatened in the past (during the Mughal and the British rules within India), Indians have always chosen to hold strongly to their religious identities. Furthermore, religion — Hinduism in this context — is distinctive enough (at least from the perspective of the host community) to give the Hindu community an identity separate from those of the the rest of the Americans. On the other hand, it is flexible enough to allow Hindus to participate in the activities related to other religions (e.g., Christmas festivals and Thanksgiving). Religious identity is commonly shared by the diverse groups of Hindus who have arrived in the U. S. from various parts of the world and who have had diverse histories (Hindus from Uganda, Kenya, the U.K., the Caribbean); therefore, it serves as an integrating force among Hindus of diverse linguistic and national backgrounds.

Additionally, the host culture allows the practice of group/personal religion in the U.S. The choice of language as a marker is not feasible because it does not serve as a unifying factor among them (because of the linguistic diversity among Hindus). Moreover, maintenance of a language other than English is exceedingly difficult among immigrants in the U.S., because it is not effective in the public domain (school, professions, etc.).

Finally, the Hindu identity does not create any impediment to the effective function of Hindus in the host/American culture, since Hinduism has not had any confrontation with the mainstream religions in the U. S. (i.e., Christianity and Judaism). Within the religion, the Hindu community chooses religious rituals (as opposed to a scriptural or philosophical base) as the major marker of its identity for the following reasons: (a) rituals are authentic markers which have been used for thousands of years, and, therefore, they mark the continuity and credibility of Hindu identity; (b) they function powerfully to unite a community whose members do not necessarily have common linguistic and geographic roots; (c) there is an explicit experiential dimension in the practice of religious rituals (as opposed to philosophy, which lacks such a dimension); (d) rituals present a concrete struc-

ture of Hinduism which can be transferred to the next generation, (e) rituals have a concomitant social dimension as well which allows community participation and reinforcement of community values and world view, and (f) rituals form the only organized dimension of Hinduism which can create a religious ambience inspite of non-Indian sociocultural context. Rituals provide a social platform for the Hindu community from which to consolidate, express, and transfer its cultural heritage to the next generation. Thus, the religious rituals have become a major context for reconstructing the diasporic cultural identity of Hindus in the U.S.

Language in religious discourse

Language plays an important role in constructing ritualistic religious discourse. Hindu rituals are performed in a group, family, or individually at public (temples) or private places (at home). It is the language used in every ritual, which along with ritual actions reflects and constructs the religious, cultural, and social experience of the community. Traditionally, the power or efficacy of the ritual is partly attributed to the language of the scriptures, mystics, priests, and of the religious music. It is through the form and the content of the language that the religious discourse is constructed and this in turn constructs the cultural identity. However, there are many languages (Sanskrit, Modern Indo-Aryan and Dravidian and English) which have been used historically in the religious discourse of Hinduism. One must ask what determines the choice of one language over others in diasporic religious or ritual discourse. The patterns of use of these languages vary from one context to another (as public vs. private) and from temple to temple, from one sect of Hinduism to another, from priest to priest, and from saint to saint. In the following discussion, I will examine some of the dominant patterns of language used in religious discourse, and then attempt to discover the rationale for this variation and the rationale for the integration of the 'other' in both Hindu and Armenian communities in the U.S.

Hindu rituals, similar to rituals in other religions, encompass a wide range e.g., rituals related to life cycles such as birth (*janma*), naming of baby (*nāmakaraṇa*), initiation into education (*upanayana*), marriage (*vivāha*), funerals (*antyeṣṭi*); family rituals, such as the house-warming ceremony (*gṛhapraveśa*); daily or occasional worship of the family deity; celebration of special birthdays of the deities (e.g., *mahālakṣmīpūjā* 'worship of the family goddess Mahālakṣmī', *janmāṣṭamī* 'birthday of the god Kṛṣṇa', *rāmnawmī* 'birthday of god Rāma'); or worship dedicated to deities, such as *gaṇeśa pūjā* 'worship of the god Gaṇeśa', several festivals such as *dīwālī* 'the festival of lights', *holī* 'spring festival' in north India, and *pongāl* 'the day of the equinox' celebrated in south India. Additionally, some rituals performed in a group, such as the consecration of temples, chanting of religious scriptures, attending services presided over by priests, mystics, and saints from India who periodically visit the U.S. and participating in worship (including devotional songs), pilgrimages to sacred places in India and in the U.S. Rituals such as meditation, daily prayers, and reading of scriptures are performed individually.

Although the distribution of places for rituals is generally maintained, it is not absolute. Hindus may choose to perform rituals at home or in temples, with the family or with the community, depending upon the tradition within the family, caste, or their region.

In the following discussion, the major patterns of language used in religious rituals will be presented, and then the determinants of the choice will be discussed. The difference between these patterns and their counterparts in India will be pointed out, and finally, the question of authentication of the new patterns in the new context will be examined.

PATTERN 1. Sanskrit, which is considered to be the most sacred language of the ancient Hindu scriptures such as the Vedas, Upaniṣads, and the Purāṇas is used in the entire ritual. This is generally done when the ritual is performed by a traditional Hindu priest who has been trained in Indian religious tradition. The audience in this case constitutes the first or the second generation Hindus who may or may not fully understand Sanskrit. Typical examples of this pattern are wedding rituals, fire sacrifices (*homa*), as well as other rituals performed at home or at the temples. Most of the pan-Hindu rituals related to the life cycle are performed by priests and are in Sanskrit.

PATTERN 2. The second pattern includes both Sanskrit and a modern Indian language such as Hindi, Marathi, Tamil, etc. In this case, Sanskrit is used for the actual ritual and the modern Indian language is used to explain the ritual to participants who do not understand Sanskrit. For example, in a ritual performed for the well being of the members of the family, the priest recites the mantras, the sacred formulas from the religious scriptures, in Sanskrit and then explains them in the language of the family (e.g., in a modern Indian language such as Gujarati, Marathi, Hindi, etc.). In a sacrificial ritual performed at St. Louis in August 1998, the priest performed the ritual in Sanskrit using Telegu (a modern Dravidian language) intermittently to explain the ritual. In another context, the priest may use Sanskrit for the ritual, while the participants use modern Indian languages for chanting or singing the prayers which follow the main ritual.

PATTERN 3: In the third pattern, Sanskrit and Modern Indian languages are alternatively used by the mystic or the saint in devotional music. For example, Amritanandamayi, a contemporary woman saint of India who visited Chicago in July, 1998, sang devotional songs dedicated to various deities such as Rāmā, Kṛṣṇa, Siva, Kālī, etc. in Sanskrit, Malayalam, and Hindi alternatively.

I was in the congregation of about 1800 people (80 percent American, and 20 percent Indian or of Indian origin). This phenomenon of mixing languages is fairly common among the congregations of various mystics who visit the U.S. from India.

PATTERN 4. In the fourth pattern, Sanskrit and English are used alternatively. the ritual is performed in Sanskrit, and it is explained in English for the congregation as well as for the participants. For example, in a wedding ritual, the priest re-

cites the scriptural injunctions in Sanskrit and then explains these to the participants (the bride, the groom, their parents, etc.) and the congregation, which includes American as well as Indian people. In this case, the priest generally does not translate the actual original Sanskrit text, rather, he provides overall meaning/function of the ritual and the Sanskrit text.

The following example is an illustration of this pattern:

In the beginning of a wedding ritual, the priest offers worship to the fire god, requesting him to carry the prayers of the participants in the ritual to the gods in the heaven (since *Agni* 'fire' is believed to be the priest (*purohita*) who acts on behalf of the performers of the ritual).

The priest recites the following verse in Vedic Sanskrit:

*agnimīṭe purohitam yajnasysya deva ṛtvijam hotāraṃ
ratnadhātamaṃ.*

(Ṛgveda 1.1)

Literal translation: 'Agni we adore, the foremost placed, the deity of our (sacrificial) ritual, the priest, the invoker, the highest source of the treasure'.

The priest generally briefly explains, 'Now we worship the fire god and ask for his blessings in the beginning of the ritual'.

Another typical context where this usage is observed involves a recitation of a religious text/scripture followed by a discussion on the theme of that text. While the text is recited in its original language (Sanskrit), the discussion is carried out in English.

PATTERN 5. In the fifth pattern, the entire religious discourse is in a modern Indian language. A typical example of this is the reading of the religious texts/scriptures in modern Indian languages (the reading language). Some typical examples are the recitation (*pāṭha*) of the 15th century religious text *Rāmacaritmānas* (in Awadhi), *Jñāneshwarī* (in Marathi), etc. Reading of a few chapters from the scriptures is a common ritual followed in Hindu families as well as in religious congregations. In this context, the members of the group are generally first- or second-generation Indians.

PATTERN 6. In the sixth pattern, the entire discourse is in English (with a few Sanskrit phrases). In the Vedanta Center in Chicago, which is a monastery of the Ramakrishna order, the morning prayer is entirely in English. An example is given below:

'Song of the Sanyāsī'
Strike off thy fetters!
Bonds that bind you down,
of shining gold or darker baser ore;
Love, hate, good, bad — and the dual
throng.
Know, slave is slave, caressed or whipped,
not free;

For fetters, though of gold, are not less to bind;
 Then off with them Sanyāsī bold!
 say, 'om tat sat! Om!'

Note that except for the last line (which is in Sanskrit), the entire prayer is in English. This is not an English translation; rather, the original composition is in English. The last line in Sanskrit (*om tat sat! om!*) means, 'that (the divine) is (indeed) the truth/eternal reality'. Also, in the Hindu tradition in India it is customary to end a prayer or a religious discourse with this line.

Another example where English is used for the entire discourse is in the reading or recitation of traditional Hindu scriptures such as the *Bhagavadgītā* in English translation at the temples of the International Society of Krishna Consciousness in Chicago, Pennsylvania, and Hawaii. While reading of the scriptures in Sanskrit is also accepted, devotees who are not trained in Sanskrit are free to read the scriptures in translation. The above pattern is prevalent among American devotees.

PATTERN 7. This pattern involves a mixture of excerpts from the Sanskrit and English texts accepted as scriptures of Hinduism or Christianity, respectively. This particular pattern is a very recent phenomenon and has not been discussed yet in any studies. This pattern is mainly emerging within the context of wedding rituals, when the bride and the groom belong to two different faiths (e.g., Hinduism and Christianity) and want to preserve their own traditions while accommodating the religious traditions of the other person. As mentioned earlier, I have been an active participant in constructing a wedding ritual of this type where the bride was Hindu and the groom was Christian (Catholic). An ordained Catholic priest from a local church and I constructed a ritual, which included excerpts from the Vedas and the Bible. An example of the mixture of the two scriptures is given below:

EXCERPT FROM THE SANSKRIT (VEDIC TEXT):

*yatprajñānamuta ceto dhṛtiśca yajjyotirantaramṛtaṃ prajāsu
 yasmānna ṛte kiṃcana karma kriyate tanme manaḥśīvasaṃ-
 kalpamastu.*

(Yajurveda 34.3)

'May my mind abide in the auspicious one, the supreme knower and the intelligent one, the eternal light which shines like the very essence of all beings, and without whose power no action is ever accomplished. Let my mind firmly abide in the auspicious one.'

ENGLISH BIBLICAL TEXT:

'Love is patient, love is kind, and envies no one. Love is never boastful nor conceited, nor rude.' (Corinthians 13:1-3)

A close examination of the above 7 patterns shows that the choice of one over the other is determined by various socio-religious factors such as faith in the

religious authenticity of the pattern and/or its pragmatic function(s) within the ritual (e.g., consolidation of linguistically, and regionally/geographically diverse Hindu groups, integration of the Hindu and non-Hindu/American participants, or of the first- and second-generation Hindus). Functional distribution of the languages may be presented as follows:

(a) Sanskrit: traditionally accepted as the most sacred language of the Hindu scriptures (the Vedas, and the Upaniṣads) and believed to be the divine language (*devavāṇī*). Therefore, Sanskrit provides authenticity to the ritual. In the diasporic context, it functions to integrate a Hindu community which has diverse linguistic and geographic roots (see Pattern 1).

(b) Regional (modern Indian) languages can also function as languages of Hinduism. However, they express regional Hindu identity (as opposed to the 'pan-Hindu' identity of the ritual). Thus, their exclusive use in rituals generally functions to express or reinforce the regional character of the ritual, and they are used when the congregation consists of the Hindus from a particular region such as Bengal, Maharashtra, Tamilnadu, etc. (See Pattern 5). In another context, in addition to Sanskrit, a modern Indian language may be used to explain a ritual to the audience in their regional language (Pattern 2)

(c) When modern Indian languages are alternatively used with Sanskrit (Pattern 3) by the mystic/saint, they provide integration of regional and transregional/pan-Hindu identity of the religious system.

(d) English does not have the status of a religious language in traditional Indian Hinduism. However, in the diaspora, it has acquired a twofold function: it can act as the language of communication between the priest and the English-speaking audience. (Pattern 4, the ritual is performed in Sanskrit and it is explained in English.) Additionally, it is viewed as the language of religion for Hindus of certain religious orders whose primary language is English (Pattern 6).

(e) The mixture of Sanskrit and English scriptures (Pattern 7) functions as a process of globalization and integration of both the guest (Hindu) and the host (American) cultures.

The above patterns of language-use in the Hindu rituals in the U.S. raise two major questions: Do these patterns differ from the patterns of language used in the Hindu rituals in India? What is the authority which authenticates these patterns in the US.? The answer to the first question is that the use of many different languages in religious rituals is part of the Hindu tradition. Although Sanskrit is viewed as the most ancient language of the Vedas, the oldest Hindu scriptures, modern Indian languages (both Indo-Aryan and Dravidian) are also accepted as legitimate languages of Hinduism. Scriptures have been composed in all of the modern Indian languages that are widely understood (as compared to Sanskrit,

whose intelligibility is very low among common people). Additionally, as mentioned above, the scriptures in modern Indian languages reflect regional cultural beliefs and religious themes. Therefore, while Sanskrit is used in major pan-Hindu rituals (for example, weddings, funerals, etc.), the modern Indian languages are used in the region-specific rituals (e.g., the worship of the goddess Ekavirā in Maharashtra, or of Kālī in Bengal, etc.). Also, the distribution of the languages across rituals is dictated by the ritual themes (regional vs. pan-Indian). (For further discussion on the thematic diglossia, see Pandharipande 1992).

It is important to note that although the use of different languages in religious discourse is not uncommon in India, when more than one language is used, it is generally used alternatively. Languages are not mixed in the same ritual text. Code-mixing is rare. Moreover, the use of English is prohibited in religious discourse in India, since it is viewed as the language of the *mlecchas*, the 'spiritually polluted'. Traditionally, it is viewed as the language of the British, the political rulers, who were excluded from the religious domain of Hindu life. English wields power in the secular realm, but it is powerless in the religious realm (for further discussion on the relative power of Indian languages in the religious domain, see Pandharipande 1986).

Another major difference between the patterns of language-use in India and the U.S. is that explanation is not a part of Hindu rituals in India. When I asked one of the priests in India last year (1998) why he did not explain the ritual since a majority of the people in the audience in the Gaṇeśa temple (*siddhivināyaka*) in Mumbai did not understand Sanskrit, his answer was that the 'ritual action' (*karma*) and language (*mantra*) have an efficacy of their own; they are timeless and unchanging, and therefore sacred and powerful. Explanation belongs to the secular realm; it changes with time, while *mantra* does not. According to him, the people in the congregation knew what the ritual was about, and therefore, there was no need for any explanation. When I asked him whether he would consider the inclusion of explanation to be legitimate (although he himself did not do it), he condemned the priests who included explanation in the ritual, since according to him, such action negates the boundary between the secular and the sacred. For him the authority and authenticity of the religious rituals comes from the timelessness of the scriptures and the scriptural language.

In contrast, the priest in the U.S. did not agree with this. His argument for mixing Sanskrit with English for explanation was that 'the ritual is being performed in a different space (*deśa*), time (*Kāla*) and situation (*sthiti*). Just as our god appears in different incarnations, (fish, tortoise, Rama, Krishna, etc.) so does our language (changes its forms) to suit the context. There is nothing wrong with it!'

What is important about the two opinions is that they both authenticate their views by rooting them in the Hindu tradition. This explains why what is authentic is determined by what is viewed as the authority. This may explain the inclusion of explanation in the diasporic discourse. However, the question still

remains as to why it is acceptable to the community. What is the authority in religious speech-communities which licenses the patterns discussed above?

All discourse patterns are conventionalized by some authority. However, when they have been fully conventionalized and have acquired the status of 'grammaticalness', the authority is never questioned or examined (i.e., we never ask why 'Be quiet' is a command and 'Can you pass the salt' is a request. However, when new discourse patterns are introduced, their conventionalization takes place through authority. Therefore, in order to understand the change (synchronic or diachronic) and the conventionalization of new patterns, it is necessary to examine the authority which licenses these changes. For example, English-Hindi mixed code is licensed in India by the 'social élite' (For further discussion, see Kachru 1983). Knowledge of the authority will be important for predicting the occurrence/nonoccurrence of certain patterns of language use.

Close observation shows that there are two major sources of authority which authenticate these discourse patterns in India and in the U.S. One is the scriptural (and relatively fixed) and the other is that of the mystics and saints, which is dynamic and interactional since they vary in time and space. Let us examine the patterns of language from these two perspectives.

First, let us examine the scriptures. Across religious traditions, the language of religious scriptures is ipso facto accepted as the authentic language of religious discourse. Thus, Arabic, Chinese, Hebrew, Sanskrit are authenticated by the authority of the scriptures (recall Pattern 1). Sanskrit is the language of the Vedas (the ancient Hindu scriptures). However, in Hinduism, scriptures have also been composed in medieval, as well as modern Indian languages (e.g., Awadhi, Tamil, Telegu, Marathi). Therefore, Pattern 5 is also authenticated. It should be noted here that in this context Sanskrit is mixed with these medieval/modern Indian languages, but the point is that they are not Sanskrit.

The second and perhaps the most powerful authority is that of the mystics, saints, or visionaries (*r̥ṣi*) in whom the community has faith or whom the community views as the 'enlightened ones'. Hinduism was not founded by any one single person, but was perpetually authenticated by various mystics and saints at various times during its history. In fact, the scriptures, including the Vedas, receive their authenticity because of the people's faith that these were revelations of the truths narrated by the *r̥ṣis*, or saints, who had experienced them. It is traditionally believed in India that the mystics indeed are *Avatars*, or divine incarnations, who contextualize the truths for the people at a given point in time and space, and, therefore, it is further believed that the language of the mystics is divine and is the most appropriate for that particular group at that time and place. Thus it is the interaction of people's faith in the mystic and the mystic's use of the language (or a combination of languages) that grants authenticity to a language in a religious discourse.

The belief that the mystic uses a particular language in order to make the timeless divine truths relevant in a particular context is particularly significant in

that it explains Patterns 3 and 6. Let us look at Pattern 6 first. Prabhupāda, the founder of the International Society of Krishna Consciousness (1964), a major Hindu movement which allowed conversion of non-Hindu to Hinduism, used English as the language of Hinduism for Americans. A monk at the Hare Krishna temple in Hawaii said to me, 'Our guru Prabhupāda said to us "you must pray in the language which is close to your heart, if it is not English, so be it!"' Similarly, several mystics and saints from India who periodically visit America authenticate the use of English as the language of their religious discourse when they integrate the linguistically-diverse Hindu community with Americans. As mentioned above, I attended one such congregation recently in July (1998) in Chicago where Amritanandamayī (a woman saint of contemporary India) sang devotional songs from different Indian languages, using Malayalam for her own speech and having her devotee provide a simultaneous English translation (Pattern 3). Since the saint in whom the community has faith allows the use of different languages, their occurrence in discourse is immediately authenticated.

It may seem on the surface that the language known to the people becomes the language of the discourse. However, this is not necessarily the case. It is the faith of the devotees in the authority that authenticates the use of a language. The following examples illustrate this. A large number of young second-generation young Hindus insist on the use of Sanskrit (which they do not understand at all), as opposed to English, for Hindu rituals because they perceive Sanskrit as the language of their tradition and not English, which they equate with American non-Hindu culture. In contrast to this, the monks in the Vedanta Center know Sanskrit and yet use English for their morning prayer because their *guru* Vivekananda (who established the monasteries of the Ramakrishna order) used it.

Finally, (the most debated) Pattern 7 where Christian and Hindu scriptures are mixed, is gradually being accepted in the Hindu community. Should we say that the vision of authority is changing? Note that the example given for this pattern contains the most authentic Hindu scripture (the Vedas) and also integrates the most authentic religious scriptures of the Bible, making the ritual acceptable to both Hindus and Christians. I think this ritual reveals the most salient feature of the postmodern globalization or a new definition of fusion of the guest or diasporic culture with the host culture where each culture assimilates with the 'other' without giving up the difference.

In the discussion so far we have seen that the pattern of discourse is authenticated by authority which is determined by the faith of the community. Therefore, although the use of English in religious discourse or mixing Sanskrit with English (mixing the Biblical text with the Vedic text) might seem to be an aberration in the contemporary Hindu tradition in India, it in fact conforms to the age-old Hindu tradition of contextualizing religious discourse in the language of the people.

Constructing the meaning of the message in religious discourse

Now I move to the second part of this discussion, which is the construction of the meaning of religious discourse in the U. S., or in other words, the interpretation of Hindu religious beliefs as well as of Hindu religious practices. Similar to the patterns of language-use, the interpretation of the Hindu religious beliefs and practices undergoes change in the diasporic context. It is important to examine the difference between the meaning/interpretation of the religious beliefs in the U.S. and their counterparts in contemporary India, and, furthermore, to understand the rationale for the change or the difference. I propose in the following discussion that new interpretation of beliefs is the method or a device used by authority (mystics, saints, as well as scholars) to authenticate religious beliefs in the context of the U. S., especially for the young, second-generation Hindus and non-Hindu Americans. It should be noted that although not all mystics, priests, and scholars subscribe to this view, it is on the rise. This process of new interpretation is important for understanding how the 'other' is integrated into the structure of both guest and host cultures. This change can be seen as part of the overall process of contextualization of the religious system (Hinduism) in the new context where both the guest and host cultures converge.

Although the process of reinterpretation of Hindu beliefs is widespread, in this discussion, I will concentrate on only one aspect of it, i.e., the interpretation of the images and statues of Hindu deities, along with some of the worship practices. It is a well-known fact that Hindus worship images and statues of their deities. In the U. S., the statues of millions of Hindu deities, their vehicles (mouse, eagle, serpent), and ritual practices such as breaking a coconut before offering it to the deity in a worship ritual, are interpreted symbolically. For example, Narayanan (1987:166), while describing the interpretation of the Hindu beliefs in the U.S., refers to a temple publication named 'Saptagiri Vani' which illustrates the interpretation of the religious rituals and beliefs. 'When one burns camphor, the priest burns all your past notions, beliefs, conclusions etc. — the act of burning the camphor stands for *Guru Upadesha*; breaking the coconut symbolizes breaking of the ego or *ahamkara* and so on'. She further points out that the symbolic interpretation of the beliefs extends to the vehicles of gods such as the eagle (*garuḍa*) which according to the symbolic interpretation, 'stands for soaring ambition and desires, the elephant (*gaja*) a symbol of ego, the serpent (*śeṣa*) a symbol of anger. Their treatment as vehicles of gods is equated with 'disciplining one's undesirable qualities and is symbolized in a subtle manner by taming and conquering an animal' (Narayanan 1987:167). 'Similarly, in a sermon, a Hindu woman-priest in Chinmayananda Mission (1992:165) says, 'The ritual of worshipping God represented by an idol or symbol is replete with significance. The elaborate rituals of Tiru Ārādhana are prescribed for propitiating the lord symbolized in an idol. Narayanan (1987:166) provides a rationale for why such interpretation is presented in the U.S. by quoting from Saptagiri Vani. 'If one has to appreciate the real essence of Hinduism, one must learn to appreciate the science of symbolism. In absence of such an understanding, Hinduism will appear funny,

unintelligent, and absurd. In the process of knowing this science of symbolism, one discovers the deeper meaning of the real Hindu tradition which apparently appears to be superficial'. According to Narayanan, this interpretation is motivated by the need felt by the Hindus in the U.S. to explain their religious beliefs on the basis of the logic of symbolism which will be acceptable to the people in the U.S. Narayanan claims that such interpretation deviates from the contemporary Srivaiṣṇava tradition in South India where the deities, their vehicles, and practices are viewed exactly as they are (deities and practices). Narayanan (1987:166) claims, 'These sentiments are at variance with traditional Srivaiṣṇava *acaryas* who held that the deity in the temples totally, completely God; the *arca* (literally, 'that which is worshipped') has a nonmaterial form composed of nonearthly substance called *suddha sattva*, and the incarnation in the temple is as real as the incarnation of Rāmā or Kṛṣṇa'. According to Narayanan, this symbolic interpretation is a way in which the Hindus attempt to authenticate their tradition in the alien context of the U. S. She continues, 'It is my impression that many Hindus in this country accept the symbolic meaning as their heritage and their generic neo-Vedantic package seems to be entirely acceptable to them. They are almost relieved that their rituals have a symbolic meaning'.

The above discussion shows that the interpretation of the Srivaiṣṇava tradition in India has changed in the U.S. The questions which we need to address is what is deviant in this context? Is the symbolic meaning/interpretation of the orthodox Srivaiṣṇava tradition deviant or is the process of adapting the interpretation of the beliefs to the new context deviant? Although the answers are complex, it is extremely important for understanding the maintenance and shift of the tradition in the construction of the meaning of religion in diasporic discourse. It is clear that the symbolic interpretation of the Srivaiṣṇava beliefs about the statues of the deities deviates from the orthodox sectarian Srivaiṣṇava tradition. However, the adaptation of rituals to new social contexts and their reinterpretation suitable to the context are very much part of the Hindu tradition. K. K. A. Venkatachari (1987:178) correctly points out that 'Such adaptation preserves the vitality of ritual in new social settings and functions to preserve the tradition at the time it is being transformed'. Venkatachari quotes an interesting example from the same Srivaiṣṇava tradition which reinterpreted a Vedic belief and changed the ritual accordingly. He points out that, according to Vedic tradition, a corpse is polluted and polluting. Therefore, during the ritual of cremation, the sons wear the sacred thread (*yajnopvīta*) on the right shoulder, which is opposite to the normal practice of wearing it on the left shoulder. However, the Srivaiṣṇava tradition does not treat the body as polluted or polluting after death because it has provided a vehicle for the soul to attain the supreme abode (*paramapada*). Therefore, the Srivaiṣṇava tradition allows sons to wear the thread on the left shoulder during the cremation. The hymns of the Alvars (non-Vedic Dravidian saints) are chanted during this ritual. This mixture of Vedic and non-Vedic practices in the ritual is accepted by the Brahmins and they are part of the Tamil doctrines.

I agree with Vekatachari that adaptation of rituals to new social contexts is not new to Hinduism. Starting from the Brāhmaṇa literature (6th century B.C.E.) to the 10th century commentary (*Mitākṣarā*, Hindu rituals have been adapted to the needs (socio-religious and political) of the people. In 12th century, Maharashtra, Jñāneśwar, a mystic saint, revolutionized the Hindu tradition by authenticating Marathi, the local regional language, as the legitimate language of Hinduism on a par with Sanskrit; the local deity Viṭthal as a legitimate Hindu deity equal to the traditional Hindu deities such as Viṣṇu and Śiva; and pilgrimage to the abode of Viṭthal (Pandharpur) as a legitimate ritual similar to the traditional Vedic rituals involving elaborate fire sacrifices. On the one hand, Jñāneśwar legitimized the regional language, deity, and rituals, and contextualized Hinduism suited to the time and needs of the people for whom the traditional language of religion (Sanskrit), and rituals had become inaccessible. Additionally, the Bhagawadgītā in the 3rd century C.E. adapted Hinduism to the need of the time to integrate diverse castes, paths to the goal, and ontologically different forms of existence by reinterpreting Hindu belief in the oneness and divinity of all (for further discussion, see Pandharipande 1998). In the 20th century, Gandhi reinterpreted some of the basic Hindu concepts such as *tapas* 'performance of severe mental and physical exercises', and *ahiṃsā* 'nonviolence' to adapt Hinduism to the politically and socially relevant (for further discussion on Gandhi's interpretation of Hinduism, see Bon-durant 1958). What these reinterpretations have in common is their deviation from contemporary orthodox interpretations of the Hindu beliefs; they extended the domain of Hindu beliefs by making them relevant in the context, and they were based on some fundamental principles/beliefs in Hinduism.

In the diasporic context, (similar to the native context) the tradition changes; however, the difference is, the change is more abrupt in time and space in a diasporic context, and therefore it is more noticeable. The interesting question is not whether or not the tradition changes, but what is the function of the change in the new context or what needs does it meet — and how is this change authenticated and how is it rooted in the system of Hinduism? Let us look at the symbolic interpretation in the context of these questions.

One of the major reasons for Hindus in the U.S. to construct and maintain religious identity is to transfer it to the next generation and help them construct their own Hindu identity. Second-generation Hindu youth has lost contact with the traditional Indian sociocultural context where the authority of the transmitted religious world or ritual actions is questioned neither by the Hindus nor non-Hindus. However, in the context of the U.S., where the second-generation is growing up, the meaning of the Hindu tradition needs to be first understood and then explained to non-Hindu.

The symbolic interpretation is convincing for the young second-generation Hindus because it explains the diversity of deities (i.e., the one divine can be experienced through diverse symbols) within and outside of Hinduism and thereby places all religions (Hinduism, Christianity, Judaism, etc.) at the same level.

Moreover, the symbolic interpretation fits into the modern method of logic or rational explanation for religious meaning (i.e., why break a coconut? Because it is metaphorically or symbolically a breaking of the ego). Thus, in this case, it is the method of symbolic reinterpretation which is used by the authority, (i.e., the saints, mystics, and scholars) to authenticate the religious meaning. We may ask, 'Is it secularization of the religious meaning?' This is a difficult question to answer in the context of Hinduism, because as discussed earlier, the Hindu beliefs have been periodically re-interpreted in varied social contexts and authenticated within the history of the Hindu tradition. The most fascinating fact to note in this context is that Hinduism was not always a religion of images or statues of deities. Rather, until about the 5th century B.C.E, it was a religion of abstract divinity. (For further discussion on the philosophy of the *Upaniṣads*, see Hiriyanṇa 1973.) The concept of the abstract divine was concretized in the form of actual stone and clay images to make religious concepts intelligible and the divinity accessible to common people for whom it was difficult to conceptualize the nameless and shapeless divinity. However, it was not assumed that the divine was limited to any one image; rather, there was always an effort to legitimize many forms of the divine. The doctrines of treating different deities as (a) incarnations (*Avatāra*) (b) various powers (*śakti*), and (c) functions of the same divine, provide evidence for the continued effort within Hinduism to explain the diversity of deities without giving up their essential unity. Therefore, the symbolic interpretation can be seen as a strategy for accommodation of the 'other' within and outside of Hinduism.

Conclusion

The above discussion focused on the following dimensions of the religious discourse of the Hindu diaspora in the US.: (a) the rationale for choosing religious rituals as the marker of the diasporic Hindu identity; (b) the patterns of language used in rituals and their functions; (c) the authority that authenticates those patterns, (d) the construction of the meaning of religious beliefs in rituals and the question of its legitimacy and authenticity. It was pointed out that the patterns of language-use and the meaning of the religious beliefs undergo change in the diasporic context, and that change is motivated by the need to adapt the Hindu system to the new/host American context without giving up the essential continuity of the system.

The discussion shows that religious discourse in the Hindu diaspora in the U.S. is neither homogeneous nor is it unidirectional. The patterns of languages used in the Hindu rituals are diverse, and the choice of one as opposed to others is determined both by the function of languages in the Indian/Hindu tradition as well as by their role in the new host/American culture. The process of transformation can be seen as the process of globalization (i.e., it incorporates features of the host culture (the use of English in the Hindu rituals)) as well as localization (it re-constructs the non-American Hindu identity). It is also observed that 'Hindu identity' itself is not a monolithic concept. It depends on the perception of what constitutes Hindu identity by the individuals and groups. The diverse patterns of

language used in rituals reflect this diversity of perceptions of Hindu identity (pan-Indian vs. regional). Additionally, the construction of the discourse is also influenced by the immigrants' aspirations for themselves in the new context, (i.e., their ideational self). In other words, the patterns of language-use as well as the reinterpretation of religious beliefs show beyond doubt that the religious discourse in diaspora is constructed between the perception of the inherited Hindu identity and its desirable projection in the host culture. Unlike Safran's definition of diaspora, a majority of Hindu immigrants in the U.S. neither aspire to return to India, nor do they want to assimilate completely with the host American culture. They want to construct a Hindu-American identity rooted in both Hindu and American cultures, but not identical to either. This goal necessitates accommodation of selective features of both cultures, e.g., mixing of English with Indian languages, symbolic interpretation of Hindu deities, etc. Safran's definition of diaspora does not take into account the convergence of the guest and the host culture in the new diasporic identity. In general, the process of constructing diasporic identity involves translation of original identity in a new social setting. The translator has to blend two cultural codes, which gives rise to a mixed cultural code of diasporic identity.

NOTES

¹ This devotional song is recorded on an audio cassette which was released in 1986 from the Sri Venkateswara temple in Penn Hills, Pennsylvania.

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